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ABSTRACT

Past research has shown that those in a subordinate (learner) role are more sensitive to how their leaders (teachers) feel about them than are leaders sensitive to their followers. This study was conducted to further investigate this phenomenon by assigning subjects to be either a boss or an employee. Subjects (N=120) interacted in pairs. Twenty-four subjects each interacted individually with four other subjects for a total of 96 pairs. The interactions consisted of an interview, an assembly task in which the boss instructed the employee, and a decision-making task. Subjects completed four questionnaires at the end of each task on which they rated their feelings about themselves during the task, their feelings about the other person, how they thought the other person felt about them, and how they thought the other persons felt about themselves. The results showed that subordinates were more sensitive to how their leaders felt about them (the subordinates), and leaders were more sensitive to how their subordinates felt about themselves. These differences are discussed in relation to the role requirements of leader and subordinate. (Author/NB)

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THE EFFECT OF ROLE ON INTERPERSONAL SENSITIVITY: FURTHER EVIDENCE

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The Effect of Role on Interpersonal Sensitivity: Further Evidence

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Abstract

Past research has shown that those in a subordinate (learner) role are more sensitive to how their leaders (teachers) feel about them than are leaders sensitive to their followers. This study was done to further investigate this phenomenon, specifically in a boss-employee type situation. One hundred and twenty subjects interacted in pairs - 24 subjects each interacted individually with four other subjects for a total of 96 pairs. The interactions consisted of an interview, an assembly task in which the boss instructed the employee, and a decision-making task. Results showed that subordinates were more sensitive to how their leaders felt about them (the subordinates), and leaders were more sensitive to how their subordinates felt about themselves. These differences are discussed in relation to the role requirements of leader and subordinate.

The Effect of Role on Interpersonal Sensitivity: Further Evidence

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Past research has suggested that those in a subordinate role are more sensitive to the feelings and thoughts of their leaders than are the leaders sensitive to their followers (Snodgrass, 1985). This has been explained by the need for subordinates to be aware of how they fare in the eyes of their leaders for self-preservation. It has been offered as an explanation for the alleged greater sensitivity of females as compared to males (e.g., Hall, 1984; Miller, 1976; Weitz, 1974; Wittig & Skolnick, 1978). In fact, Snodgrass (1985) found no sex differences in sensitivity when females were assigned leader roles in half the interactions.

Snodgrass (1985) looked at interpersonal sensitivity in terms of the object of one's feelings; i.e., A's sensitivity to how B felt about A (e.g., does she like me?), and A's sensitivity to how B felt about B (e.g., does she feel confident?). The greater sensitivity of the subordinate was found only for sensitivity to how B felt about A; there was very little difference between the sensitivity of the leaders and followers on how B felt about B, although there was a slight tendency for leaders to be more sensitive to how B felt about B. We explain the greater sensitivity of the subordinates as a need to be aware of how the leader feels about them in order to garner as favorable a response as possible. The leader does not have such a need to know how the subordinate feels about the leader; it is more likely that the leader would want to know how the subordinate feels about him or herself in order to better direct the subordinate (e.g., does the employee feel

confident about doing this job?).

The past study (snodgrass, 1985) established leader-follower roles by having one interactant teach the other the letters of the signed alphabet. There may have been variables inherent in a teacher-learner role that affected the results. The study reported here established leader-follower roles by assigning one to be the "boss" and the other to be the "employee" in three business-related tasks. The hypotheses to be tested were (1)subordinates will be more sensitive to how the leader feels about the subordinate; (2)leaders will be more sensitive to how the subordinate feels about him or herself; (3)there will be no main effect for sex.

Method

One hundred and twenty subjects interacted in pairs. Twenty-four subjects (12 males and 12 females) interacted individually with four other subjects (a male leader, a female leader, a male follower, and a female follower), for a total of 96 pairs. The order of the interactions was arranged in a Latin Square design. Subjects interacted in three tasks: an interview, an assembly task, and a decision-making task.

Questionnaires. Subjects filled out 4 questionnaires at the end of each task on which they rated, from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much), (1) their feelings about themselves during this interaction, (2) their feelings about the other person, (3) how they thought the other person felt about them, and (4) how they thought the other person felt about themselves. There were 13 items on each of the four questionnaires; the items were the same on each questionnaire, only the viewpoint changed. There were 3 sets of 4 questionnaires, one set after each task, with items pertaining to that

specific task.

Sensitivity scores were created by correlating the items in which A rated how she thought B felt with B's ratings of how he actually felt. These correlations were transformed by Fisher's z to form sensitivity scores. The following scores were used as dependent variables: a Total score, including all 39 items, 13 from each of 3 tasks; and a score for each task, including the 13 items from that task.

Procedure. Subjects were escorted into a room in which there was a small table near a one-way mirror (the interactions were videotaped from behind the mirror with the full knowledge of the subjects). The "boss" sat in an upholstered arm chair at the "head" of the table and the employee sat in a wooden chair along the side of the table. The boss had a clipboard on which to make notes and on which to keep instructions.

First, the boss interviewed the employee for three minutes and both subjects completed the first set of questionnaires containing items concerning the interview. Second, the boss was given instructions for the assembly of a puzzle and the employee was given the pieces of the puzzle. The boss was to verbally instruct the employee without showing the employee a diagram of the finished product, and the employee was to do the actual work of assembling the puzzle. After 4 minutes they completed the second set of questionniares with items concerning the assembly task. Finally, they were given a case to read (e.g., a college president and dean must decide how to choose one third of their teachers to be laid off), to discuss together, and to come up with a decision. They were given three minutes for the discussion. They completed the final set of questionnaires containing items about the decision-making task, were debriefed, and left.

Results

Three-way analyses of variance were done separately for those subjects who interacted with four other subjects (Ss) and for those who interacted with only one other subject (Os). Sex of S was the between factor, and role and sex of O were within factors. The analyses produced strong role effects, supporting the first two hypotheses. For A's total sensitivity to how B felt about A, the main effect for Role produced $F(1,22)=50.66$, $p<.0001$, effect size $r=.83$[1] for Ss and $F(1,22)=23.83$, $p<.0001$, effect size $r=.72$ for Os. The means (in Table 1) indicate that the subordinates were more sensitive to how B felt about A than were the leaders. For A's total sensitivity to how B felt about B, the main effect for Role produced $F(1,22)=9.31$, $p=.006$, effect size $r=.54$ for Ss and $F(1,22)=52.86$, $p<.0001$, effect size $r=.84$ for Os. The means (in Table 2) indicate that the leaders were more sensitive to how B felt about B than were the subordinates. A four-factor ANOVA, including type of sensitivity as a factor, produced a Role x Type interaction, indicating that leaders were more sensitive to how B felt about B and subordinates were more sensitive to how B felt about A. ($F(1,22)=53.40$, $p<.0001$, effect size $r=.84$ for Ss; and $F(1,22)=86.22$, $p<.0001$, effect size $r=.89$ for Os). There were no main effects for sex of S or for sex of O, supporting the third hypothesis. ANOVAs on the sensitivity scores for the individual tasks produced significant role effects as well, and no sex effects.

Discussion

The results in this study using boss-employee roles not only replicated the effect of the role found in the earlier study which used teacher-learner roles, but strengthened the effect. Also, the effect of role on sensitivity

to how B felt about B became significant in the business type situation. How might we explain this interaction of role by type of sensitivity? A subordinate (say a man) needs to know how his boss is responding to him because the boss holds the rewards and decides whether the subordinate deserves a positive evaluation or a raise or advancement. A subordinate will need to know whether the boss thinks he is doing a good job, likes him, thinks he is being too "pushy", etc. It is not as likely that a subordinate will be concerned with whether the boss (say a woman) is feeling confident or enjoying her work or feels she is doing a good job. However, a boss might be interested in how her employee feels about himself; e.g., whether he enjoys his work, feels confident about the work he is doing, feels oppressed, etc. On the other hand, a boss would not be so concerned with how the employee feels about her; e.g., whether the employee likes her, whether the employee thinks she is a good boss, etc. This interaction of role by type of sensitivity might be explained by motivation - those in each role are motivated to be sensitive to one type of feeling more than the other.

The interaction might also be attributed to the feelings that are more likely to be <u>expressed</u> by those in the two roles. A boss is not as likely to reveal his or her feelings about him or herself to an employee, but is more likely to reveal feelings about the employee, as reward or to modify the behavior of the employee. Similarly, a subordinate is not as likely to reveal his or her feelings about the boss to the boss. Revealing positive feelings might appear to be ingratiation, and revealing negative feelings will certainly not lead to rewards. However, a subordinate is more likely to reveal feelings about himself or herself to the boss in order to get guidance from the boss or to let the boss know he or she is doing a good job.

Interpersonal sensitivity is an interaction between two people (A and B), between A's ability to perceive and B's ability to express B's feelings. The two elements are interdependent; a very skilled perceiver cannot perceive feelings that are not being expressed. The explanation for the results of this study lie in a combination of the differing perceptions of leaders and followers and also in their differing expressiveness.

This study has supported the recent research that suggests that there is not so much a female advantage in sensitivity, but that sensitivity is influenced by the role one plays in interpersonal interaction. These results further suggest that it is not always the subordinate who is more sensitive, but that those in leader roles are more sensitive to another's feelings about oneself. Interpersonal sensitivity is a social phenomenon that is affected by the social context. The discovery of the situational variables affecting sensitivity will contribute to the improvement of social interactions in all areas of life.

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Footnote

1. The effect size measure, *r*, is defined as $[F/(F + df)]^{\frac{1}{2}}$, when *F* has only one *df* in the numerator (Cohen, 1965; Rosenthal & Rubin, 1982).

Table 1

Mean Scores for Sensitivity to How B Feels About A
by Sex of S and Sex of O and Role

S's Sensitivity

	Male S		Female S		
	Male O	Female O	Male O	Female O	Mean
Leaders	.240	.166	.311	.042	.190
Followers	.569	.397	.562	.662	.548

O's Sensitivity

	Male O		Female O		
	Male S	Female S	Male S	Female S	Mean
Leaders	.373	.274	.325	.281	.313
Followers	.593	.562	.603	.627	.597

Table 2

Mean Scores for Sensitivity to How B Feels About B
by Sex of S and Sex of O and Role

S's Sensitivity

	Male S		Female S		
	Male O	Female O	Male O	Female O	Mean
Leaders	.330	.380	.620	.550	.470
Followers	.382	.223	.232	.192	.257

O's Sensitivity

	Male O		Female O		
	Male S	Female S	Male S	Female S	Mean
Leaders	.500	.540	.461	.613	.528
Followers	.162	.170	.179	.032	.136